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National Indian Telecommunications Institute
Comments to the Joint Commission on Universal Service
Rural and High Cost Areas
Karen Buller
April 12, 1996

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Greetings (in various Native American Languages)
My name is Karen Buller. I am CEO and President of the National Indian Telecommunications Institute. We are national in scope and supported by several public and private grants. In short NITI assists American Indians and Alaska Natives in getting on the Internet and becoming authors by creating their own information to run on the Internet.

While our goal is to access the Internet by any means, most of our constituents seek to do so by terrestrial phone lines. Therein lies the Problem.

Telephone penetration is at its lowest among Rural Native American communities. While national statistics show Native American Rates in the 80 percentage range, anecdotal evidence would indicate a much lower rate. The Navajo Nation, for example, hits estimates as low as 40%. I live in New Mexico and the counties where Pueblos and Indian reservations are located, have dramatically lower telephone penetration rates. Many phone lines on Navajo are so low in quality they will hardly carry a voice signal--let alone a data signal. Most reservations do not have 911 or other customer service options.
We Need Consistent high quality dial tone!

The average T1 line for broad band data transmission cost approximately \$1000 per month in most American metropolitan areas, such as Washington DC. In Pine Ridge, South Dakota a T1 line costs \$2400/month. In Crownpoint, New Mexico, on the Navajo Reservation, a T1 line costs \$2800/month. In Bishop, California on the Bishop Paiute Reservation a T1 line costs \$3200/month.
This is not equal access!

The myth of equal access encompasses most all of Rural Indian America. Without truly equal access to data and Plain Old Telephone Service, our people will fall further and further behind in economic development. Our children will be cast across the chasm from the Information Haves. Our babies and elderly will continue to die for lack of access to even basic dial tone.

The second point I must make is that competition does NOT work in isolated, extremely rural areas. Those who venture out to provide most any type of technical service are almost assured of whatever price they ask. Those who say competition will address access problems are at best naive and at worst crassly ignoring the needs of other Americans.

Other means to assure access must be preserved and enriched. Subsidies and other means must address high construction costs as well as monthly charges. In Rural Indian Country waiting periods for initial phone service can range from 6 months to 2 years. Last year NITI wanted to include the Bishop Paiute Tribe in an education project we are undertaking, but were told that it would be at least a two year wait for a 56 Kilobyte line to get to that reservation.

The costs for initial lines laid are often exorbitant. I often hear of \$10,000 plus in the Southwest. No American should be expected to pay such a high rate for basic connections to health, safety and information. I have just received statistics from the Lower

Kuskokwim School District of Alaska which show that their village schools can expect to pay \$7200 per computer for only 4 hours a day of service for one computer over a year as compared with a more urban school (Juneau) who pays \$21 per year for unlimited service. There must be some guarantee that existing services are kept up and remain affordable for our people.

I am continually bemused and amazed at the uses my people design for the Internet. Many people assume only school children and computer nerds take to this form of technology. On a trip to the Arctic I observed Inupiat elderly women busily sharing their web "Hotlist" while interspersed with discussing whaling net repairs. On the Paiute Reservation, the Tribe invited the entire mixed community to surf the net at a Tribal Internet Fair. The entire community from mayor to the gas pumper turned out to wait in lines 4 deep for their turn at the Internet. This is a wonderful example of how Native Americans are leading non- Indians into technology use.

Many of our people sell art works and use web pages for economic development. Others are sharing their culture, heritage and language on the Internet. Many languages have been captured before total extinction with this technology. Access to high speed and broad band width data lines, must be part of the definition of Universal Service.

Finally it is important to note that the 550 plus Federally recognized Tribes are sovereign nations and that they enjoy a government to government relationship with the United States of America. The Joint Commission cannot ignore this special relationship. Most of these nations were guaranteed health and education benefits through treaties signed by the United States government.

I would like to close by telling you the words of an elderly Dine man. He asked me to come and give a computer/Internet demonstration tot he chapter house leaders of the reservation. I asked him what he would like me to show. He said, " I don't know, I know nothing about computers or your Internet. All I know is that my daughter went away to college and now she won't come home. Maybe if we bring technology to our reservation, our children will come home."

Thank you

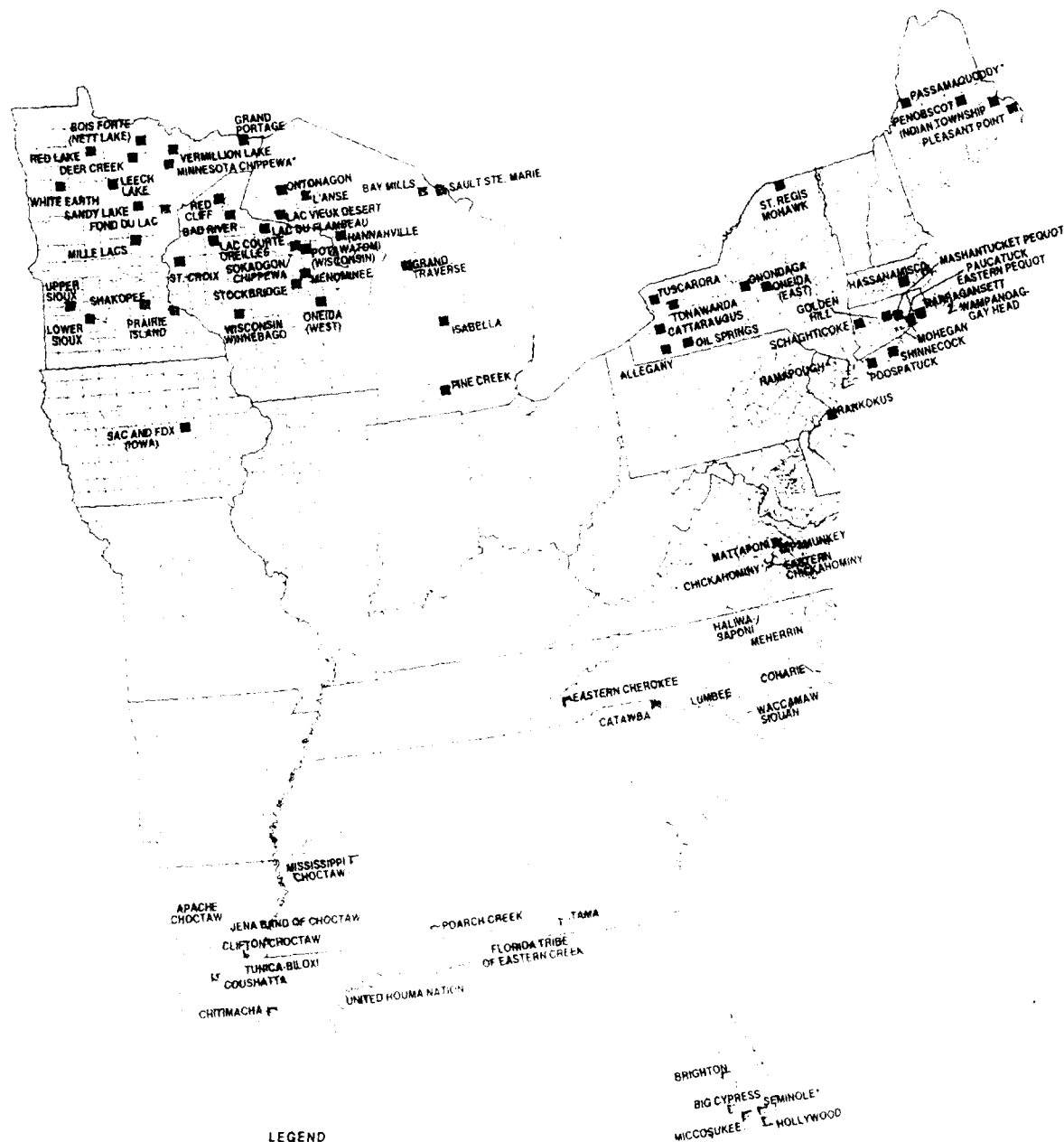
Major points:

- *Universal Service does not exist*
- *Competition does not work in rural isolated areas*
- *Affordable broad band width capabilities must be provided*

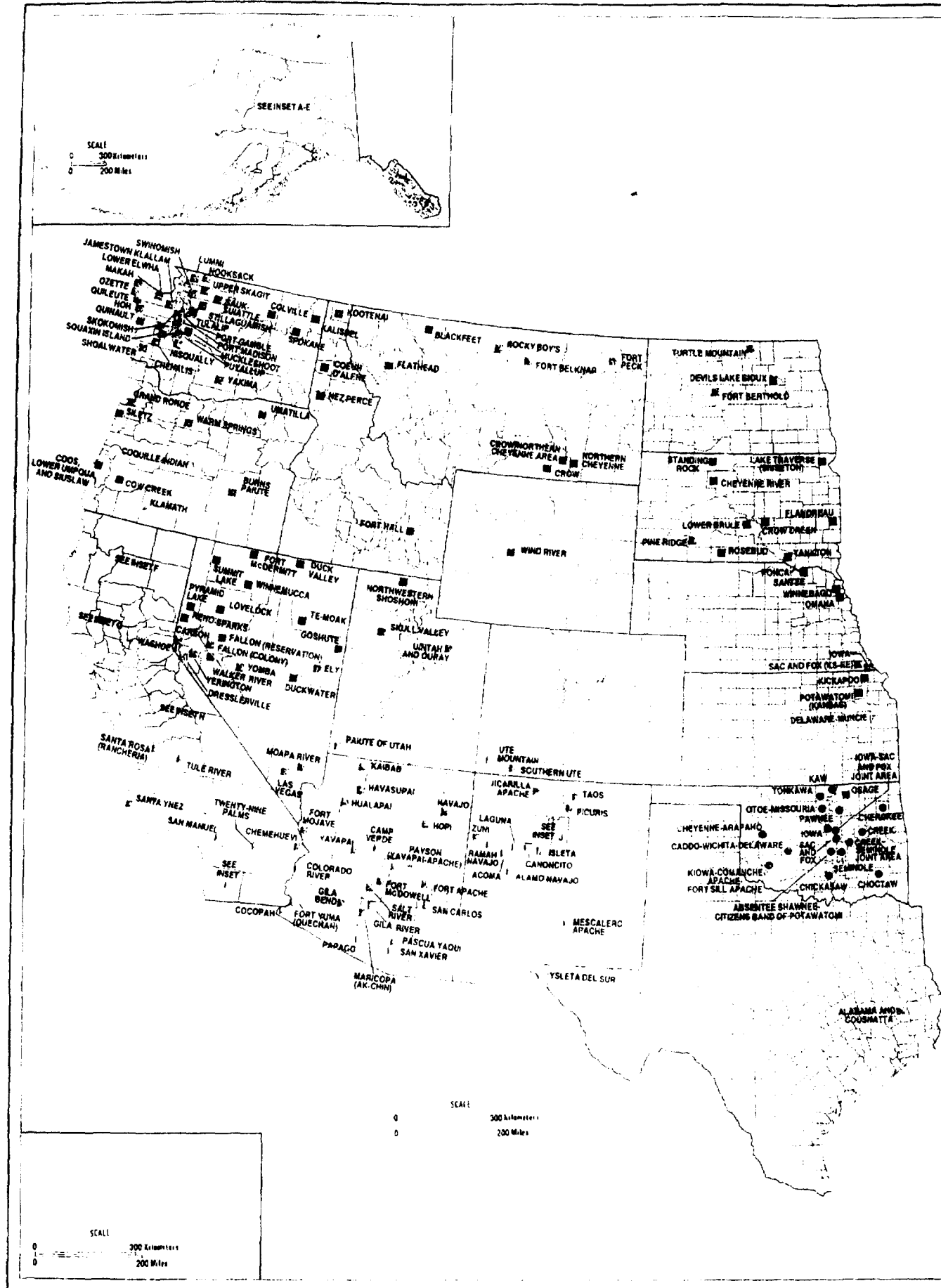
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American Indian and Alaska Native Areas: 1990



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE Economics and Statistics Administration Bureau of the Census